

DRAFT
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
MINUTES

Tuesday, March 17, 2015

The Town of Bloomfield Economic Development Commission held a Special Meeting on March 17, 2015 scheduled for 8:30 A.M. at the Town Hall in Bloomfield, Connecticut with the following members present:

Present:

Jerry Long
Bonnie Bercowetz
Harold Harper
Fred Hesketh
Rich McDermott

Also Present: José Giner

Philip Schenck
Joan Gamble
Joel Neuwirth
Syd Schulman
Rob Rowson
Donald Poland
Mike Goman
David Driver
Kathy Wolkner
Rich Hughes
Dale Bertoldi

Chairman Long opened the meeting at 8:34 and called for a motion on the minutes of February 10, 2015.

Minutes of February 10, 2015

Bonnie Bercowetz moved to adopt the minutes of February 10, 2015 as offered. Rich McDermott seconded the motion. The minutes were approved unanimously with Chairman Long abstaining.

Discussion Regarding Wintonbury Mall:

Mike Goman gave an update on the status of the property. The property had entered into a strict foreclosure and that LNR was the asset manager in charge of ultimate disposition. LNR has hired KeyPoint Partners to manage the property which includes handling the leasing.

Mr. Goman stated that LNR may or may not decide to try to add value before placing the property for sale – most probably through a straight auction. This typically would be within a 6-9 month time frame. He explained the bidding process. He stated that it will be offered “as-is” and “where-is”. He has been in touch with LNR and they do not have a set schedule yet as they are still bringing themselves up to date with the particulars of the property.

Mr. Goman then discussed various strategies that the Town could undertake regarding getting their interest known in the long-term development of the property. It was generally agreed that the Town had a vested interest in attracting the type of purchaser that would be on board with the type of development that the Town has envisioned for this important property.

Mr. Gorman stated that his firm was working with the Director of Planning and Economic development, José Giner, to develop promotional materials that would summarize the Town’s vision and interest in the property and its surrounding areas.

Philip Schenck agreed with the strategy put forth by Mr. Goman since there was little desire on the part of the Town to pursue purchasing the property to better control its ultimate disposition. He stated that we need to make the Town’s interest known and solicit positive bids from developers who would be on board with developing the Mall consistent with the Plans previously adopted by the Town. He stated that the bidders would be more likely from Connecticut or the immediate Region. He felt that we should put on a marketing push with brochures, ads in trade papers as well as personal solicitations.

Mr. Goman stated that he had reached out to LNR for a possible meeting and was told the time was not right until LNR had a better handle on the property. He said that the marketing package would be ready this week and that he was putting together a list of likely investors who would normally be interested in a property such as this.

Bonnie Bercowetz asked if someone might buy it and just hold it. Mr. Goman stated that anything could happen – especially if the final price was low enough. Part of the Town’s marketing effort would be to try and discourage that type of bidder.

Ms. Bercowetz asked what role the EDC should have in this effort. Mr. Goman stated that they could help respond to plans and ideas that might be offered by prospective bidders and help steer them toward the Town’s desired outcome.

Mr. Harper asked if the Liquor store was part of the property. Mr. Goman responded that it was not. LNR had commissioned a survey to better delineate the bound of the property it controlled.

Chairman Long asked if the Town had a set of goals that were clear enough to communicate to potential buyers. Mr. Goman replied that the Town Center Plan document would be the guide for the general vision of the area. He stated that we should not be too specific at this point.

Rich McDermott asked if we could offer density bonuses and other incentives to entice developers to proposals that were consistent with our general plans for the area. Mr. Goman said that the Town Center Plan goes into those types of issues. Mr. McDermott asked if we could be more up front with the “carrot” of density bonuses. José Giner stated that we can certainly let it be known that we would be flexible in those areas if the developers proposed a reasonable plan that kept to the spirit of the Town Center Plan.

Joel Neuwirth stated that the Town Council was concerned about the future of this property. He stated that there was a strong desire to see something good happening there. He felt that it was important to attract area developers who were familiar with the Town and understood the concerns.

Joan Gamble stated that it was important that Bloomfield not lose the good businesses that were currently in the Mall. She felt it should be a priority to keep them here as various scenarios were discussed.

Mr. Goman explained that the process could get a little “wild and wooly” as the date of an auction approached. His experience was that it may attract a lot of would-be investors just “kicking the tires” with no real financial backing to accomplish a deal. There will be a lot of inquiries to the Planning office and it was important for the Town to get the proper message out in order to influence the right type of developers to step forward.

Chairman Long thanked Mr. Goman for his insights.

Fred Hesketh moved to endorse the plan of action that was discussed by Mr. Goman in developing a strategy to positively influence the ultimate disposition of Wintonbury Mall. Bonnie Bercowetz seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Update on Center Apartments project.

José Giner stated that the Tax Abatement Agreement had been finalized by the Town and was currently being reviewed by the developers of the project. He had been told by Paul Butler that they were on the verge of bringing on board an investment partner and would be making an announcement soon. He stated that he would check back with Mr. Butler if he didn’t hear anything further by the end of this week. The last time he spoke with Mr. Butler he was told that they anticipated breaking ground on the first phase by September.

Ms. Bercowetz asked if the developers would be selling off the first phase. Mr. Goman stated that it was his understanding that they would be retaining some interest but they were hoping to attract a large investor to front the capital needed to get the project off the ground. He stated that they own all the properties so they had a vested interest in getting things done sooner rather than later.

Filley Park Update

José Giner stated that the MDC had given final approval of for the first phase of the project along Tunxis Avenue. Jon Thiesse has told him that the bids would go out in April for a projected July start. The next phase would not be done until at least next year and it involved the dredging of the pond and removal of the dam.

Town Green

Mr. Giner stated that the preliminary design for the renovation of the Town Green had been completed by Fuss & O’Neill and that the plan had been well-received by the Town Council. There had also been some discussions with the Connecticut DOT regarding the redesign of the intersections bordering the Green to enhance traffic flow and aesthetics. Those discussions

were characterized as positive. A final decision on how we proceed with the Town Green Re-design should be held off until we get a better understanding of what ConnDOT will propose or accept as a solution for those intersections. Mr. Giner also mentioned that the Town had put in for a traffic/pedestrian/parking access study for the Town Green area in the coming budget.

Staff and Commission Member Update on Various Topics of Interest

Bonnie Bercowetz asked Mike Goman about the absorption rate regarding apartments in the current market. Mr. Goman replied that he sensed that the apartment market was close to being overbuilt. He believed that there was still some room for absorption but that the cost structure of the projects and their status in the approval process were important factors in determining which ones will go forward. He believed that the apartments in the Town Center were among those that were in good shape to proceed.

Ms. Bercowetz also asked Mr. Goman and his staff to comment on some of the articles that had come out recently regarding retail centers as well as the perceived trend that people were moving away from the suburbs.

Mr. Goman restated his belief that the region was oversubscribed on retail space. He believes that we will see on-going contraction in the market and very little new retail being built unless its purpose-built projects like a new COSTCO. This trend will persist unless there is significant population growth. He believes that many older retail spaces at the end of their useful life will see a re-purposing.

Donald Poland addressed the issue of suburban out-migration by stating that he has seen the “return to the city” narrative in every decade since the 70’s. He believes that there are no more than half a dozen cities in this country where this is actually occurring. He does not see this occurring in Hartford or its region. If anything he is observing something more like a return to the village centers such as we are seeing in West Hartford Center. Connecticut cities exist on a metropolitan scale. His conclusion is that we still like the suburbs in Connecticut despite the articles that seem to indicate otherwise.

There was some discussion regarding the changing demographics of the suburbs in this region. Mr. Goman stated that the most significant concern was the decline in school enrollments. This was not a good sign and could have significant long-term impacts for the region.

Rob Rowson updated that Commission on the efforts to organize the Center Merchants. He reported that there was good turnout at the February meeting and that he hoped to build on that with next Monday’s morning meeting at Carbone’s Kitchen. The Town’s Leisure Services Director, David Melesko will attend and highlight the events that would be happening on the Town Green this summers. The merchants have expressed to him the positive impacts that these events have on their business.

David Driver stated that he, the Town Manager and the Director of Planning & Economic Development had met with Griffin Land representatives this month to discuss their on-going projects and future plans. They expressed an interest in having the Town work with them to explore the possibility of zoning tweaks for the area encompassing their Phoenix Crossing project. He also reported that MetLife has hired Cushman-Wakefield to market the empty space at their office complex.

Kathy Wolkner passed out some draft brochures that Goman + York has been developing to target specific industries with the message that Bloomfield is a good place to relocate their businesses. She would like to see the Town promote this message better through their website and would be making specific recommendations soon.

Adjournment

Bonnie Bercowetz made a motion to adjourn at 9:48 a.m. The motion was seconded by Harold Harper and approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
José Giner